

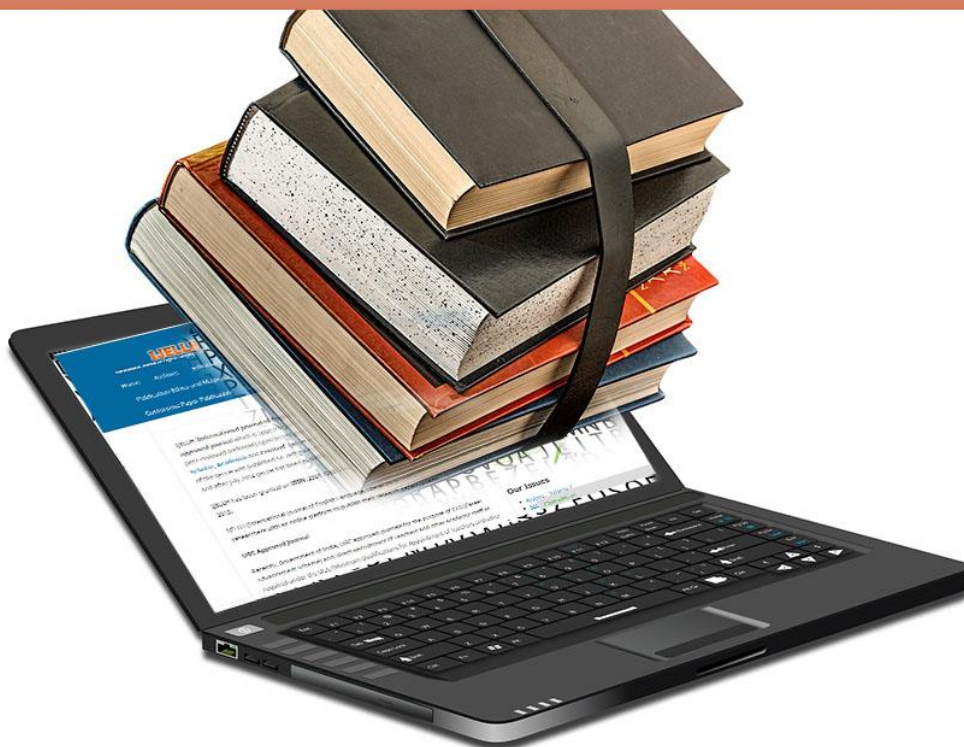
ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

www.ijellh.com

Dr. Darbarsing Dhansing Girase

Associate Professor, P. G. Dept. of English,

NTVS's G. T. Patil Arts, Commerce & Science College,

Nandurbar, Maharashtra, India

Email: darbarg@gmail.com

Title of the paper: Postcolonial Reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Arjun"

Abstract

An activist writer from Bengal, the literary prowess of Mahasweta Devi, has been duly acknowledged at every level. In "Arjun", while touching upon the grave issue of deforestation, its real causes and devastating consequences for the local tribal population, she writes about the wretched lives of Shabar tribal community in West Bengal. An attempt has been made here to read the story in the light of certain ideas of post colonial theory, particularly in the light of various implications of post colonial critical terms like subaltern and mimicry.

Keywords: Ketu, Bisal Mahata, Ram Haldar, Arjun tree, subaltern, mimicry.

Introduction

Originally written in Bengali, the English translation of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Arjun" appeared in the March/April 2013 issue of Indian Literature, a bi-monthly journal of Sahitya Academi. The story takes place in the forests of West Bengal among the members of tribal community called Shabar and tells a pathetic tale of their exploitation, marginalization and oppression at the hands of local landlords and bureaucrats. Post colonialism as a set of ideas may specifically refer to the complex relationship between colonizer and the colonized

but by extension it covers the relation between oppressor and the oppressed, tormentor and the tormented, exploiter and the exploited, and the attempt has been made here to read the story in the light of post colonial ideas, particularly the post colonial critical terms like subaltern and mimicry.

Discussion

The story takes place in the context of large scale deforestation of this tribal belt. The deforestation has rendered the local tribal people vulnerable who once earned their living from the forest. The deforestation has been actually caused by dirty nexus between politicians and bureaucrats. Of the two, the former is represented in the story by local landlords, Ram Haldar and Bisal Mahata, who are affiliated to two different but dominant political parties in the region while the latter is represented by forest officials and police. Together the two also represent the market forces in the form of their unquenching thirst for profiteering at the cost of exploiting forest and the tribal community. Unfortunately and unwittingly the tribal villagers become unwilling participants in this situation. The story delineates the pathetic situation of the tribal people vividly. Most of the tribal men live by cutting trees for Ram Haldar and Bisal Mahata who sell the wood in cities with huge profit while paying the tribal wood-cutters a meager amount. “Ketu very often remains in jail. The culprits like Ram Haldar force them to cut trees from the jungle in secret, and unfortunately the poor, illiterate and helpless men like Ketu are taken to jail” (Devi: 68) for “One who holds an axe must go to jail. This is the rule here.” (Devi: 71) The desperation of the tribal people is evident when Ketu, a tribal man assures Ram Haldar of his readiness to do anything to earn his meager wages. Ketu says “Babu, we get only four rupees at the end of day. If you ask us to cut the trees, we’ll cut them. If you ask us to cut men, we’ll cut them off too.” (Devi: 68) The situation is so grim that cutting trees for mere four rupees per tree has become

the only source of income available locally to these tribal people who once lived by rich wealth of the forest. Not that the police and forest department authorities do nothing. They do their bit by occasionally arresting the poor tribal men for the offence of illegally cutting trees and sending them to jail. So when people like Ketu are in jail, there are always more Ketus available for cutting trees. This is how the area has become barren that was not very long ago full of lush green forest and life source local population. Life thus went on with tribals becoming more and more vulnerable, with the area left with almost no forest and the politico-bureaucratic nexus busy in making maximum money at the cost rendering the tribal population totally helpless and subservient. Of course there is democracy and the people elect their representatives too. But it practically means nothing because votes can be bought with money and muscle power. Ketu knows it well that both, Rambabu and Bisalbabu, "...are the same...Without satisfying both these gods, it is difficult to survive in this area." (Devi: 69) It is not without reason that Bisal Mahata is so sure about casting of votes. That is why he reaffirms from Ketu, "...I know very well that you'll cast your vote to whomsoever I ask you to..." (Devi: 69) This pathetic existence renders these tribals totally helpless, powerless and subservient.

This wretchedness of their situation would have continued but for an interesting turn of events. It so happens that one day Bisal Mahata asks Ketu to cut the Arjun tree which stands at the crossing of the three roads in the village. Ketu does not like the idea. "Bisalbabu's words struck almost as a heavy blow on the heart of the starved, destitute and recently jail-returned Ketu". (Devi: 70) He feels "...oppressed by the thought of tree. Alas! They cannot save the tree." (Devi: 70) Somehow Ketu feels powerless to disobey Bisal Mahata. There is a reason. Arjun tree is not just the oldest tree in the village but is "...the last symbol of the Bandihi jungle of the earlier Zamindari rule. When Ketu looks at the tree, so many things of the past crowd in his memory." (Devi: 70) The Arjun tree is the last remainder of the good

old days "...when the forest was dense and these Shabars were solely dependent on it...The old people of the village have absolute faith in the tree. They worship the tree like the god. And Ketu would not be able to save that tree now!" (Devi: 70) Ketu weakly accepts the ten rupee note offered by Bisal Mahata for the job which he wants to get done within a day. Ketu is next seen drinking *chullu*, the local liquor, along with his friends Banamali, Diga and Pitamber as if to drown the sense of anger, frustration and helplessness. Overwhelmed with grief, Pitamber says, "For so many years the tree has been protecting us like a guard! Now the forest means, it is only this Arjun tree. And the children of the forest means only us now, a few households! And they need the tree!" Ketu adds helplessly "Now everything is for these Bisalbabu and Rambabu." (Devi: 72) They realize that their condition is also like the Arjun tree, useful but mute and helpless. And then Ketu smiles a clever, tricky smile as if he got an idea to wriggle out of this unpleasant situation. They hit upon a plan to turn the tables on their tormentors. They raise an altar with stones around the tree, worship the tree with garlands and turn the Arjun tree into their village god. The place is almost turned into a fair and people from all around participate in the fair of the village god. "Santhals, Kherias, Sahis, Bhumijas, all are there. The people of other castes are also there." (Devi: 74) People like Bisalbabu and Rambabu had always thought the tribal people to be poor, illiterate fools. But now when Bisalbabu sees the maddening crowd dancing frantically with drums and dhols he realizes the depth of his defeat. "Somehow Bisal is frightened. He feels very weak. This tree! These people! Everything is known to him. But how do they seem so unfamiliar now? He is frightened. Terribly frightened." (Devi: 74) The silent protest and the silent rebellion of the Shabars is absolutely unexpected for Bisal Mahata.

The development of the story, the turn of events in it, and the behavior and actions of the characters in it can be understood in the light of post colonial ideas, and the application of these ideas, particularly subaltern and mimicry can throw new light to understand its

dynamics. The characters and situations in the story can easily be divided into two groups—with Shabars as oppressed, marginalized, tormented, exploited subalterns and the politico-bureaucratic nexus as their oppressors, tormentors and exploiters. A sufficient understanding of the critical terms subaltern and mimicry is obligatory here to realize their application to the story. The term ‘subaltern’, in its original military sense, indicates a person of low/subordinate rank or inferior position. The term was first used in non-military sense by Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci largely as a synonym for proletariat (in his *Prison Notebooks*, 1973). In Gramscian theory the term ‘subaltern’ is used to indicate the subordinated consciousness of non-elite social groups. The project of “Subaltern Studies” led by historian Ranjit Guha that began in the early 1980s further expanded Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern by encompassing all oppressed groups – working class, peasantry, women, tribal communities...and used it as a name for general attribute of subordination. The concepts of subaltern and subalternity are widely debated issues within postcolonial theory. They are now regularly used in history, anthropology, sociology, literature and literary criticism. The subordinated position of the subaltern leaves him/her marginalized, oppressed, subservient and the ‘Other’, without agency by his or her social status. He/she has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism. His/her voice is silenced and he/she can speak, if at all, only through actions of protest. Now a days the term subaltern commonly refers to persons who are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure. As suggested by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”) a subaltern cannot speak. His silence is taken for granted. But he is spoken of, and those who claim to speak on his behalf may not represent his genuine concerns, may be because of overlapping of interests, or because of the difference between content and intent. For them he is the ‘other’. Those who claim to speak on his behalf only further perpetuate his marginalization. Mimicry is another increasingly important term in postcolonial theory. It

“... describes the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized”. (Ashcroft: 139)

When “...the colonized subject ‘mimic’ the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behavior of the colonized.” (Ashcroft: 139)

When we try to understand the situation of Ketu and his likes in the light of above terms we come to know that they have been rendered helpless, powerless, marginalized and poor by their tormentors like Bisal Mahata, Ram Haldar, as also the police and forest officials who intimidate the Shabars with their power and authority. “Whether they make any offence or not, every now and then they are taken to custody by these jungle babus and the police babus.” (Devi: 71) They are too helpless and subservient to oppose their tormentors. Ketu and other Shabars do not want to cut Arjun tree but they cannot speak their minds and remain silent. The silence of people like Ketu is then conveniently construed as consent. Pushed to the brink, Ketu plays slyly in the same coin that his tormentors have so brazenly played. Note his “...clever, tricky smile” (Devi: 73). Ketu is poor, illiterate but clever enough to “...always pretends to be foolish” (Devi: 69) before people like Bisalbabu and Rambabu because people like him depend on them for livelihood. He pretends to obey Bisal Mahata but silently prepares to contradict and does the opposite to have his way. The concept of mimicry refers to imitation of the oppressor by the oppressed but with complex and contradictory results and is “...quite threatening” (Ashcroft: 139). People like Basal Mahata treat the likes of Ketu like dirt in ordinary situation but when they want some work to get done from them or when the elections are round the corner they treat them with kid gloves. Ketu may be an uneducated, illiterate poor tribal but he is smart enough to learn this art from his oppressors. And when a

time comes he turns the table on his tormentors. In the postcolonial discourse mimicry comes to mean imitation as well as mockery and it is the second sense of the term ‘mimicry’ which is fraught with multiple implications for the subaltern to give vent to his feeling of anger, injustice, frustration, protest, silent rebellion and revenge. Ketu seems to cleverly make effective use of this weapon not only to save himself and his folks and the Arjun tree but also to teach a lesson of life to his oppressors.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the post colonial reading of Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Arjun” helps to understand better the complex dynamics of relationship between oppressor and the oppressed, tormentor and the tormented, exploiter and the exploited. Further, it helps understand the acute sense of marginalization, powerlessness and subservience of the Shabar tribal community. The study also reveals how subaltern, in spite of being powerless and marginalized finds ways, in the form of mimicry, to make his tormentor realize the subtle power of his silence, subservience and meek resistance.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 2000. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge. Indian Reprint 2009. Pp. 139-142, 215-219
- Devi, Mahasweta. "Arjun". *INDIAN LITERATURE, Sahitya Academi's Bi-monthly Journal*. NO. 274. Vol. LVII No.2. March/April 2013.
- Nayar Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley(India)Pvt.Ltd.,2010. Pp. 153-172
- Selden, Raman *et al.*, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 5th ed. New Delhi : Pearson Education Ltd.,2006. Pp. 233-245

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>